



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

is no better way of discovering what poetry is truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to keep always in mind lines and expressions of the great masters and apply them as touchstones. Thirteen words are saved and the meaning definitely expressed."

What Spencer says of literary style is true of all the Arts.

A WORK OF ART MUST HAVE CONTENTS

Finally, I repeat, a work of art needs more than mere style, essential as that is; it needs Contents—a subject, a story, or an idea, a plot, a sentiment that appeals to mankind, in and for itself, apart from the style and manner of its presentation. The poems of Gautier have fine style, so have those of Baudelaire. But who reads them, outside of professional historians of literature? who wants to read them? No normal person—at least not more than once. They are either too empty, or too rabid in contents, and their fine style will not help them to obtain "a place in the sun" or in the hearts of mankind.

Chateaubriand, I repeat, was miserably mistaken

when he said: "A book lives only by virtue of its style." That was a Romanticist's doctrine. But as Brunetière truly remarks: "Romanticism means the same thing as Individualism, Lyricism and Egotism." And, while modest egotism that ends in social service, by creating masterpieces full of beautiful style in composition and delightful manner in surface technical execution, lifting mankind to a plane of lofty poetry, is a beneficent activity; egomania, on the contrary, ending only in mystifying or blatant or vulgar works and social dis-service, because bewildering and depressingly material, is a force to be discouraged by every means in our power.

In order to allure readers to reflect over this matter I repeat: **STYLE IN ART IS A MATTER OF FUNDAMENTAL COMPOSITION, AN ARRANGEMENT OF LINES, MASSES, COLORS; OF WORDS, SOUNDS AND OF MOVEMENTS, INDICATING A DEPARTURE FROM THE TRUTH OF NATURE OR FROM THE COMMONPLACE.**

MANNER IN ART IS A MATTER OF SURFACE TECHNICAL EXECUTION, INDICATING A DEPARTURE FROM THE TRUTH OF NATURE AND THE COMMONPLACE.

F. W. Ruckstuhl

OBSTACLES TO POETRY IN AMERICA

By ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON

LACK OF DISCRIMINATION BY PRESS AND PUBLIC

WE hear a great deal nowadays about "the revival of poetry in America," and, judging from the space given to the publication and consideration of all grades of verse by the periodical press, there would seem to be some basis for thinking that the interest in this form of literary composition is on the increase. But it is easy to mistake the significance of a superficial and vague curiosity concerning verse, or concerning writers of verse, particularly of the eccentric type that is now ravaging most of the magazines and some high-class newspapers, revealing the fact that, so far as poetry goes, these periodicals lack either intelligence, standards, or a sense of responsibility. For, so far as the market may effect the product, the importance of a discriminating public taste based on sound principles of criticism cannot be overrated.

Our people are perhaps farther behind in sound appreciation of good poetry than in appreciation of any other form of art, except the drama, which here is rarely regarded otherwise than as a source of entertainment. A Frenchman goes to the first night of a new play not merely to be amused, but in the hope of finding it a work of art, both literary and dramatic. A French critic of the better sort, with pride in the great achievements of his country in art and letters, labors to elucidate and to instill in his readers, standards based on principles, and this firm intellectual basis is what has given strength and distinction to French taste. A Frenchman scorns to have an opinion that he is not prepared to defend with reasons.

I should say that the chief obstacle to poetic taste in America is the lack of standard on the part of editors, for it is a sustained attitude that creates taste and not the occasional publication of good

poetry in conjunction with meretricious or commonplace examples, thus confusing the judgment in its formative state. Naturally such an indiscriminating attitude toward verse is a source of discouragement to those who pursue poetry not as a recreation but as an art.

POETRY NOT CONSIDERED AS AN ART

And this brings us to the crux of the question. How few of those in this country who are called upon to write of poetry regard it as an art! The newspapers in their notices consider it chiefly as news, giving incomplete and disproportionate résumés of a volume, with, sometimes, a quotation—which, however disjointed and unrepresentative, at least allows the author to speak for himself. Most critics and readers are interested in poetry for subordinate reasons—for instance, as a manifestation of some novel tendency, or as a reflection of character, or as a propaganda, or as a criticism of life, or as an extension of the frontier of verse. To how few is it of any moment whether the poet is an artist, having command of the technique—that is, the tools—of his profession! Fortunate is it to find a critic who does not confound art with artifice, or consider the principles of lyrical composition only so many hard-and-fast rules hampering the freedom of the writer. To how many, for instance, is the sonnet merely a prison-house of rules and regulations, instead of the freest of all the traditional forms, and one which in the hands of Milton, Wordsworth, Keats and other English masters—to say nothing of Dante and his facile countrymen—is like the flow of a brook, or the flight of a bird, so that we conceive of it as the improvisation of a happy moment, not knowing the labor for the right word that has gone into its fashioning.

What we find lacking and desirable is a consideration of the architectonics, so to speak, of poetry—at least, of poetry that by its fine fibre is worthy of serious consideration at all. Who that reads a classic of English poetry stops to ponder it from the point of view of its construction, or proportion, or ease of movement, or progression of effect, or variety and perfection of rhythm? For the reader these technical excellencies may be negligible, because he is interested in what goes on at the footlights and not in the green room; but they cannot be ignored by the responsible critic, whose function it is to expound principles and draw that distinction between the temporary and the permanent which is the essence of taste.

THE TEST OF A POET

Besides his technique, which is to be inferred from his effects, the poet should be judged—and judged severely—by his range and weight of thought. Does he open any window of imagination upon the world? Has he anything new to offer concerning the main concepts of life—Love, Death, Nature, the Seasons, Beauty, Happiness, Sorrow, Truth, Immortality? In his long poems, has he the sustained sweep of an eagle, or only the broken flight of a lamed pigeon? Does he see any deeper into the mysteries of life and bring us any accession of hope or truth? What has he to say of such time-worn topics as Friendship, Faith, Patriotism, Ambition, Youth, Poverty? Does he express his own time? or, better, does he express the human nature that is independent of time? And, last of all, has he by the union of emotion, melody and imagination an accent of permanence? These are things which criticism, accepting its responsibility, should divine and enforce, so that a discriminating public taste may be formed and directed and become a stimulus and support of the best production.

POETRY BASED ON PRINCIPLES

The very familiarity of our people with verse of all kinds, as found in magazines and newspapers, has obscured the fact that the principles of poetry are as definite, as well-established and as immutable as those of painting, sculpture, architecture or music. It is all the more necessary, at this time, to insist upon these principles because they are constantly being challenged by a considerable number of writers—calling themselves *vers-librists* (I call them *prose-librists*) who consider that the limitations of the art are clogging and confining. This protest extends all the way from mild dissent to downright anarchy and is a part of the general egotistic lawlessness of the times, as reflected in painting by the cubists and in music by whimsical and eccentric composers of Germany and France. It would be idle to deny, even if one were disposed to do so, that in some instances the product of the dissenters is better than their theories, but when this is the case, it is usually because, like many other dogmatists, they do not make their practice conform to their preaching. In the main the protest originates either in inability or failure to produce poetry along established traditions of technic, or in a not unadmirable impatience with the barrel-organ type of composition, the only value of which is

to give facility to a poet in the art of disregarding it. That is a sort of measles which most poets catch and, if they have good constitutions, happily survive.

RHYTHM ESSENTIAL

Now let us see what are the principles against which, chiefly, this protest is directed. One of them is rhythm, another is taste, and a third is form. (Rhyme, in the specific sense, is, of course, not essential.) Of these three rhythm is not only a principle of poetry; it is a principle of life. It is transmitted to us by our parents; it pervades our waking, our walking and our sleeping. In poetry it is not accidental but essential. One might as well put under the ban the rhythm of the waves or of the sunlight as to consider it negligible in verse. If poetry is anything, it is something different from prose.

"And, sure, could life be told in prose
There were no need at all for rhyme."

The employment of rhythm is not without its pitfalls. In the hands of one who is not an artist, it may take on so disproportionate an importance as to become fair game for the critics. I confess that the very exquisiteness and perfection of the rhythm of so fine an artist as Swinburne are sometimes as cloying as the brown honey of Hymettus, and pall upon me, to the obscuration of a great poet's elevated thought; but this is a personal impression, and, whether as melody or harmony, rhythm is the one thing that cannot be left out of the definition of poetry. In place of the polished smoothness of the boulevard the *prose-librists* offer us the fortuitous bumpings of a corduroy road. Most of their work reads like a bad libretto, or suggests a drunken man trying to walk a straight line. Mark Twain thought so ill of Jane Austen that he declared any library a good one that did not contain one of her books, even, he added, if it did not contain any other volume. Much of the *prose-librist* work tempts one to say that by avoiding it one may acquire a liberal education in rhythm even if he read no poetry whatever.

THE ELEMENT OF TASTE

When we come to taste, we find something to excite the antagonism, even the animosity, of the self-sufficient, as though it were an assumption of superiority. To protest against taste is a mark of provinciality and intolerance. There are still communities in which to dress for dinner is taken as a sign of an aristocrat. Of course, taste may be over-cultivated and finicky and lacking in robustness. Against this the reaction is often extreme. In London a blasé and super-conventionalized circle of society welcomed the poet Joaquin Miller chiefly because he tucked his trousers in his boots and affected the cowboy. Here at last, they asserted, was the genuine American, all the others, whether in poetry or manners, being only imitators of the English. Miss Amy Lowell classifies among merely cultivated gentlemen who wrote verse her great kinsman, author of the noble Commemoration Ode, full of deathless lines. (One wonders if Miss Lowell still prizes the original of the "Ode to the Nightingale" and other manuscripts of Keats which in her unsophisticated days she collected, and if she will not some day consign them to that mausoleum of antiquated jog-trot poetry, the Keats-Shelley Memorial

in Rome). Lowell's sensitive and balanced taste has been characteristic of the best work of all the great poets. The lack of a broad distribution of it in this country is not something to be proud of—is, indeed, one of the chief obstacles to the poetic art.

THE REVOLT AGAINST FORM

As for form, the so-called new school has an attitude toward it that reminds me of an incident of Theodore Parker. The great preacher was once conducting a party of young ladies through the Uffizi. When they came to the Venus of Medici, one of the girls began to giggle behind her fan, whereupon Parker said to her: "My dear, dost thou know how much immodesty there is in thy modesty?" So with the prose-librists—do they know how much regard for form there is in their formlessness? They conceive of the old-school poets as occupied with conventions of technique, when they themselves are wasting time over the scrupulous avoidance of form that might well be given to the task of producing something of real poetic substance. They wreak themselves in rebellion against tradition, as though the world, or any individual, were, at this moment, anything but the Past! Of what use is it to be the "heir of all the ages" if we are to throw away all our inheritance?

WHAT THE POET SHOULD GIVE US

But, to repeat, given a decent regard for the principles of metrical composition—such as rhythm, taste, form, proportion, progression, and climax, the test of a poet is the *substance* of his work. What does he add, by stimulating the imagination or the emotions, to the enjoyment or the inspiration of the world? What new word or new view does he bring concerning the oldest topics of human interest? In so far as he gives to any one of these a fresher aspect, a broader comprehensiveness, a new co-efficient, he may fairly claim attention. If he has been able to do this, it will make no difference if he has sometimes written inferior verse. With a poet, as with a mountain, the altitude is reckoned by the highest point.

FALSE NOTIONS ABOUT POETRY

It will help us to appreciate poetry if we can clear our minds of some common misapprehensions regarding it, that are an obstacle to its spread among us. In the first place its function is not to add to the knowledge of the physical world, and therefore experience of the so-called practical sort is not an essential equipment. To dispel mysteries and reduce the area of the unknown is the business of Science. One of the chief services of poetry is not to solve the mysteries of life but to make us realize them, to awaken our wonder, and thus to keep us on a plane above the material, the self-satisfied, the commonplace and the matter-of-fact. This is far from saying that experience of a poetic sort is not of the greatest value. Something may even be conceded to the lady who once recommended to me in my editorial capacity the competence of her daughter to write love poetry because she had been "jilted twice." There is high authority for the statement that we learn in suffering what we teach in song.

Experience of life is valuable—yes, but more valuable is the imaginative outlook *on* one's own experience and on that of others. One does not have to commit a murder in order to be able to describe one in a book or enact one on the stage. There is no evidence that Dickens or Salvini ever committed one. A pertinent instance of the superiority of the mind to experience is afforded by the fact that of twenty-five admirable poems on aviation that came under my notice within the four years succeeding the first public exhibition by Wilbur Wright, not one was written with any background of experience in the art; and if anything further were necessary to prove my point, it is that sixteen of these twenty-five were written by women!

THE SO-CALLED "MODERN" SCHOOL

In the face of such a fact, and of the general participation of American poets in the life of their own time, it is irksome to hear the apologists of the so-called new school speaking of it as "modern." The only way to be thoroughly modern or to remain so is to be universal. Had Shakespeare expressed only the sixteenth and a bit of the seventeenth century, his "three-centuried wit," as Gilder called it, would not have survived to the present day. It is because he is human and essential and not parochial, either in time, or geography, or intellectual range, because he used his own period as the vaulting-board of his imagination, that he is to-day the recognized prince of all literature. He opened new windows upon many worlds, and taught us to look outside ourselves for light.

THE ILLUSION OF NOVELTY

Another obstacle to poetry is the demand for novelty, the restless inability to base one's content upon the great, simple and noble things common to human nature, as expressed in literature. This trait is a sign of crudeness and superficiality, not to say superciliousness. It is the bane of the magazines and discriminates literature from journalism. It pervades many phases of American life. A laughable instance recently came to my attention: An expert in embryology was demonstrating to a medical class the theory of the multiplication of life by cell-division—when one young woman student exclaimed to another: "Oh, but it is such an old method; I wish we could find a new one." A swarm of writers are trying to find some new path to Parnassus other than that which has been trodden plain by the feet of them that bring good tidings, the great poets of the world. To be bored by essentials is characteristic of small minds.

Another odd idea is the accent that is laid upon imagery, so that we have a little cult of writers called imagists. This reminds one of Holmes' line about the katydid:

Thou sayest an undisputed thing
In such a solemn way.

The imagists are like the bachelor who, having insistently flouted the fair sex, at fifty married. "How does he take it?" said one. "Take it?" was the reply. "He takes it as if he had invented matrimony." That a poet can be anything else than an imagist is on a par with the claim that, through the

new school, poetry has only now become democratized. Spirits of Burns and Emerson! Have we forgotten

and
 A man's a man for a' that
 I care not how you are dressed,
 In the coarsest weeds or in the best,

or that other clarion note from Concord,

God said, "I am tired of kings,"
 I suffer them no more.

One can fancy Whitman turning in his grave at the assertion of such a claim. Indeed, I can find no bravado of opinion, no awkward mingling of prose and verse, no variety of swagger or self-consciousness in the new school that is not to be found in Whitman. What he also has that I do not find there is vision, eloquence, moral force, and breadth of sympathy.

USES OF GREAT POETRY

It may be asked why it seems worth while to try to clear up these misapprehensions concerning the art of poetry. First, because every true workman has a pride in his own profession and in its power to help transform the world through the purity of its principles. There is "a glory of words," as Browning put it, that transmits from generation to generation the essential values of life in the most cogent and stirring phrases. Secondly, because, even in this time of shifting standards, we realize that poetry has been and is to be the largest contributing factor in the creation of great men. This will be by the stimulus of the imagination to the imagination. And the one quality, it seems to me, that is rarest in our private and public life is imagination. The men of imagination have been the rulers and directors of mankind, and, so far as they have expressed themselves in literature, such they remain. Imagination also is the begetter of enthusiasm, and, as Emerson says, "Every great and commanding moment in the annals of the world is the triumph of some enthusiasm." Moreover, imagination is the begetter of thought, and, as Woodrow Wilson has said, "Nothing can give a nation dignity but its thought." These expressions indicate the important part that poetry may yet play in holding our best ideals up to us, and holding us up to our best ideals.

POETRY AND MANNERS

Poetry has another important function as the handmaid of manners. I am by no means a pessimist regarding America. As a people we have in high degree many fine qualities; good-will, sensibility, sympathy, the sense of justice and of fair play, ambition, and much else that is admirable, though some of these often seem to be held in solution for lack of a pervading sense of responsibility; but in the grace of manners, the fine art of manners, it must be admitted that there is much to be desired.

Emerson has a passage setting forth that the manners of a democracy ought to be the finest in the world, since it starts with the assumption of good breeding that all are entitled to equal consideration. But our practise is sadly behind our theory. We seem to be ashamed of the good manners we have and to have a similar shamefacedness about imposing them upon the young. The slouching type of college boy who stands and walks with his hands in his pockets and bows, if he bows at all, with his heels apart, has infected our society with a vulgar carelessness and lack of dignity which are not unknown even in the halls of Congress. The beautiful courtesy of the fine old American manners, North and South—than which there were none better—seems to have disappeared. Reverence, respect for elders and strangers, if they exist, find no correlative or gracious expression. In short, whether in Boston, New York, Washington, Chicago or elsewhere, in cities, towns or hamlets, the one thing we lack socially is form. I have not time here to speak of the bearings of this on our political life, nor of practical plans to improve public manners. I am convinced that in any community a committee of five women of tact and fine breeding could do wonders for the people in this neglected field. What I wish to suggest is that the best poetry helps to make the finest ladies and gentlemen. Through it parents may choose the best company in the world for their children, teaching them the dignity and nobility of life, familiarizing them with chivalry and courtesy, transforming their egoism into altruism, till they catch that enthusiasm for the best which gives glow and vitality to human nature, and without which we are apt to become but men as trees walking. To attack form in poetry is to attack form in manners.

THE MUSE OF CONSOLATION

A final reason why we should cultivate intimacy with the masterpieces of poetry is the inspiration and consolation it will bring to us in daily life. Poetry speaks to us in the words of Emerson's "Wind Harp" and says:

'For I can mend the happiest days,
 And soothe the anguish of the worst.

It has been said that one who has learned an art in his youth can never be wholly unhappy. I will go further and say the same of one who has learned in his youth to love an art. The imperishable riches of poetry are within the reach of all. To live with them is not only to choose one's own company, but to master one's fate, and to live among the stars. In these days of transition, that for the moment seem like the going out of great beacons, one may find hope and solace in the words of the distinguished American astronomer whose devoted wife had shared his labors and who placed on the urn that holds her ashes and that now stands beside his telescope, these serene and inspiring words: "We who have loved the stars so well, how shall we fear the night!"

Robert Underwood Johnson